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ABSTRACT

In attempting to reach their students, college English teachers must take seriously the postmodern sensibility as it is oriented to a culture of commodification. Instructors should face this commodification head-on, using it to show students that they have agency as consumers. This forthright acceptance of the 1990s orientation does more to help teachers reach students than do other theories such as that of Gerald Graff in "Beyond the Culture Wars." Beneath the superficial differences in musical tastes, clothing and hairstyles, the student today, Graff implies, is basically the same as Graff himself was at that age. In "A Constrained Vision of the Writing Classroom," Louise Wetherbee Phelps criticizes Sharon Crowley for her theories which weaken "our conception of students as agents of their own future." Graff and Phelps notwithstanding, today's students are fundamentally different in at least one respect: they do not and cannot have the sense of agency that previous generations have had because the political climate is fundamentally different. If students resist traditional "belles lettres" or postmodern theories of empowerment--as Graff and Phelps suggest--this resistance is substantial; it is rooted in a sense that neither system will provide them with agency. However, instructors who acknowledge the real constraints of commodity capitalism might help students to use this culture to their advantage. Using a Taster's Choice television ad to discuss "Dover Beach" would be one approach for teachers. (TB)

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Research as Lore

My project this morning is to continue these accounts of the changing conditions of work by noting that postmodern students are different from you and me. That difference changes the conditions of our work in ways that teachers need to recognize and specify. I suspect that we can agree that teachers' local inquiries into student interests is one of the most crucial aspects of lore. These inquiries have included some of the most spectacular of lore's successes--Mina Shaughnessy's realization that her students expected to fail, for example, and that any attempt to reach them would have to take account of that expectation. But I daresay we can all produce from our own experience some equally spectacular failures--group work that turned into an encounter session instead of a collaboration, or confrontations with the students of the eighties' belief that greed is good. What made Shaughnessy so successful was her ability to imagine students' interests, even when those interests were not explicit, even when the students themselves were not capable of articulating them, *even when those interests were actually unconscious*, and especially when those interests, those expectations, were engendered by powerful cultural forces that had not in fact shaped Shaughnessy herself. She looked into a

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place where she had never been, she saw difference, and she worked with it.

What marks my most spectacular failures, and I suspect yours, are instances of assuming that what I see is what my students see, what I want is what they want. When we un-selfconsciously project ourselves onto our students' otherness, we get trouble.

Recently, mainstream theory has begun to be interested in pedagogy--and occasionally in actual students. Gerald Graff, for example, suggested not long ago that the future of "literary theory and pedagogical theory has increasingly become indistinguishable." Reception theory, he notes, "tends to focus on students as readers." Cultural theory directs attention to "the school or university" as "institutional contexts" for literary studies. And finally "the basic tactic of current theory is to defamiliarize or make strange what is conventionally taken to be normal or common sense. Such a tactic lends itself to adopting the viewpoint of students, for whom academic processes often seem profoundly strange" (65).

These observations are already implicit in Graff's *Beyond the Culture Wars*, where he "adopt[s] the viewpoint" of someone he calls "the struggling student"--one who is bored by Dover Beach but galvanized into rapt critical attention by the conflicts about it. What Graff does in that construction, it seems to me,

is to project his own memories of a middle class youth in Chicago onto the young (and not so young) middle and working class students who populate the classrooms and sit before the computer terminals today. Beneath superficial differences in musical tastes, clothing and hairstyles, the student whose "viewpoint" Graff adopts is, for him, basically a young Gerald Graff, or more precisely, the contemporary student and the young Gerald Graff are both instances of an apotheosized Universal Young Person. This assumption of universality warrants Graff's work and characterizes his liberalism. I find it very problematic.

My guiding theoretical lights, Richard Ohmann's *Politics of Letters* comes to mind, explicitly point to this universalizing tendency as a dangerous instance of hegemony. One "light" cannot, of course, "refute" another. When, however, they both shine on the same discursive place, they might illuminate something we haven't seen before. Let's try.

Graff and I both see students for whom "English" education is not working. Graff sees a student just like him, who is not being reached by either by the traditional humanism that urges him to love Dover Beach because it's a great representation of the human condition OR by the "empowerment pedagogy" that urges him to read it as patriarchal belles-lettrism. Where's the problem? I'm guessing that Graff thinks that whereas students are roughly the same, the culture has changed. For Graff it is the National

Association of Scholars and its critique of what it calls "political correctness" that constitute an external challenge that the academy must change to meet. His suggestion is that we teach the conflicts so as to accomplish two things: 1) meet the external challenge to political correctness and 2) find ways of motivating students. By doing so, he believes, we shall be "more honestly student centered than the current empowerment pedagogies, which would empower students whether they want to be empowered or not" (67). He believes that these pedagogies "address only those who have been already radicalized or have decided that they wish to be" (67). "The recent backlash against political correctness," Graff continues, suggests that on the contrary, those others will fight back, often with good reason . . .and become angry, alienated, and receptive to conservative counter-propaganda" (67-8).

A related position has been articulated recently by Louise Wetherbee Phelps in her *Profession 93* article, "A Constrained Vision of the Writing Classroom." Asserting that she "instinctively reject[s] certain dogmatic, evangelical modes of teaching writing for the sake of promoting societal or even educational change," (47) Phelps recommends instead an ethic of caring, derived from the important work of Nel Noddings, redirecting "my own motive energy (e.g., my drive to improve society, to effect reform, to reproduce myself and my own values" toward the student and invest it in his or her projects" (49).

Phelps specifically cites and opposes Sharon Crowley's assertion in *Contending with Words* that "we should alert students to the ways in which a dominant discourses affirms its dominance and thus retains hegemony over those discourses it defines as non-privileged or secondary or unimportant or dismissible" (196).

What's most interesting for my purposes is that Phelps explicitly construes this question as one of agency. She is concerned, she writes, with the way Crowley's discourse conceives "student's agency in relation to teacher's agency," and that the theories to which Crowley subscribes "weaken our conception of students as agents of their own future"; she wonders whether "[Patricia] Bizzell or [John] Clifford really subscrib[e] to such an unqualified reduction of students' agency" (50).

It surprises me that Phelps, who is usually so concerned with the conceptual warrants with which she works, does not define "agency" in this essay. She does however seem to imply a definition when she expresses a fear that teachers "trust our own political analyses and our utopian visions more than we do students' potential to become their best selves and to contribute to society in ways that we do not predict and control" (50). In that failure of trust, Phelps, believes, "we would be subverting the most basic faith of a democracy and the role of civic rhetoric in it: that people given a broad range of information, skills, and opportunities to choose among conflicting

perspectives eloquently articulated will, on the whole, make better decisions than any individual teacher or self appointed political collective can make for them" (50).

As I read Graff's and Phelps's accounts, what I see is a Universal Young Person with his baseball cap turned around backwards. That conception is the crux of our disagreement although I agree that it is useful to see ourselves as talking about agency. My student is fundamentally different from Graff and Phelps and me, precisely because persons of Graff's and my generation had *the sense of agency* that Phelps so eloquently describes, a sense of agency that our students do not, cannot, have. That is, there was a degree to which we believed that our discursive activity--burning our bras or our draft cards or even reading our Dover Beach, would have some effect on the world, an effect that we could determine. I think that our students, by and large, do not believe that their actions have much of an effect on the world and that, by and large, they are right. Richard Ohmann, among others, has shown how that absence of belief in meaningful agency has been carefully orchestrated by late capitalism's construction of "mass culture." So when students do believe they have agency, that very belief is constructed by commodity capitalism. And let me say very clearly that like Clifford and Crowley, I believe we should tell them so.

Because my student is different from Graff's and Phelps's, I propose another explanation--and another remedy--for the problem of agency we all see. Graff and Phelps see student resistance as a conscious refusal to be persuaded either by traditional belles lettres or by the discourse of empowerment. Belles lettres, says Graff, do not engage students' sense of agency and the politics of empowerment, says Phelps, denies it. I do not deny for a moment that the resistance is there. What I want to talk about is where it comes from. I think it comes from students' knowledge that neither the pedagogy of empowerment nor the foregrounding of conflict nor reasoned narratives of care will provide them with a sense of agency.

What will? Paul Smith sees agency as the potential for the subject to act even within the constraints of commodity capitalism. For him, agency emerges as a kind of tactic. If commodity capitalism has constructed "mass culture" as consumers, then consuming students demonstrate agency as consumers--by consuming things that they're not supposed to or by not consuming things that they are expected to desire or by consuming in ways that are neither predicted nor desired by producers and advertisers. Our students are shaped by the media to be consumers and they experience themselves as powerful insofar and as they consume. In a world in which everything has become a commodity, one can exercise agency by one's consuming practices, or by the refusal to become a commodity. Garry Trudeau's

consuming student sees this quite clearly, although, in my view, Trudeau himself does not. On the morning I write this sentence, the Doonesbury verdict is in: the math prof at Walden University, concerned about grade inflation, has awarded a grade of B+ to a student in his math class. The student, charging discrimination against his minority group, fraternity members, sues. The Professor is represented by a graduate of Walden U's own Law School, who has very good grades but knows very little law. After a lengthy trial, he is found guilty of discriminating against Trudeau's protagonist/plaintiff. Punitive damages are set at $5 million. When the judge reproaches the jurors for a "moronic" verdict, the foreperson retorts, "what do you want for $12 a day?" Commodified grades for commodified credit; commodified verdicts that pass for justice: this we all see as we chuckle over breakfast. But we also need to see the student's law suit as an example of agency. It commodifies something that is not supposed to be commodified. It commodifies in ways that are not intended. It refuses to commodify what it's supposed to want--understanding of mathematics.

If we could work on this need to commodify, we could have some chance at doing what Fredric Jameson recommends: to undo the postmodern homeopathically, by the very techniques of the postmodern itself. By these lights, any attempt to reach the postmodern student will have to be complicitous with her and him. It will have to enter their world, specifically their world of

commodification. And work there. Instead of thinking consumption as an epiphenomenon on the postmodern, we need to get in touch with the fact that our students cannot see us as other than credit providers. Not value providers or beauty and truth providers, or political empowerment providers but credit providers. And wemust recognize that our students will exercise their resistant tactics by refusing to consume the values and the beauty and the truth and the political analyses that we put before them. Rather than trying to get around that assumption or get over it or get beyond it we need to get into it.

I would recommend foregrounding commodification as agency, rather than foregrounding conflict. Time permits only one example. Let it be Dover Beach. Let us suppose that we have before us a group of students who are uninterested in Dover Beach. Nor are they interested in learning about the ways in which Dover Beach embodies patriarchy. Nor are they interested in discussing the conflicts about Dover Beach. They just don't want to be there. Why? Dover Beach will not get them a job. Let us suppose (and this is a difficult assumption for me) that we want to teach them Dover Beach anyway. But that we also want to offer them the kinds of insights into the baleful aspects of postmodern culture that Crowley and Clifford talk about. And let us suppose too that we want to exercise reasoned care.

What if we present Dover Beach along with the Taster's Choice

couple as instances of recommended consumer behavior? The Taster's Choice couple are, you will note, "true to one another," even when his company sends him to Paris, her son arrives inopportunely in the middle of brunch, he entertains another woman, she has her brother as a house guest. They really do seem to be on a darkling plain.

What does it mean, I would ask my students, that whereas Arnold's speaker turns to a silent woman as a kind of cosmic last resort, the Taster's Choice couple finds help for pain in a jar of instant coffee, a commodified freeze-dried stimulant? And what does it mean that the Taster's Choice woman gets to talk whereas Arnold's woman is silent? Is the Taster's Choice woman in a better position? Can we say that any of them expresses agency?

I've deliberately drawn this text from mass culture to explain or exemplify the processes of interpretation --and the political analyses -- that I'm trying to teach. I've done so not only because cartoons and advertisements are familiar to students but also because they are cultural texts.

I believe that such a tactic will both intervene in the set of practices that encourage the student to assume that her task is to write a series of commodified interpretations of poems and help her to become aware of the ways in which all texts, canonical and otherwise, form her subjectivity.

Our teaching must take account of the postmodern tendency to commodify. It must take account of forces that interpellate students as consumers and hence urge them to commodify us, their education, and their lives as subjects. Whatever agency we are capable of expressing occurs within and as a consequence of these constraints, and Socrates on the Aegean knew nothing about it.

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